

Reacting to a dose of herd mentality

Canberra observed

Laura Tingle

The images of animal cruelty were terrible. They showed cattle being stabbed in the eye before having their back leg tendons cut so they could not run away.

When animal welfare group Animals Australia released the images, the public was outraged and the government responded quickly, suspending within 24 hours live cattle exports to . . . Egypt.

Things move so quickly in politics these days; the agenda is also crowded; it is easy to forget things that have happened even recently.

It was February 2006 when the Nine Network's *60 Minutes* showed a report by the late Richard Carleton, based on footage shot by Animals Australia's Lyn White, showing brutal treatment of cattle at Cairo's Bassatin abattoir.

The ban on live cattle exports to Egypt was lifted only in 2008 after reforms were put in place to track animals to the point of slaughter through a designated abattoir.

The parallels between 2006 and what has happened over the past two weeks since ABC TV's *Four Corners* also program showed terrible images of animal cruelty filmed by Lyn White, tell us much about the live export trade and the processes of lobbying, politics and the media and how these things change with time, and with the amount of money involved.

The government might feel just a little whiplashed as it finds itself under savage attack for stopping the live export trade to Indonesia this week after being under savage attack last week for not stopping it.

The animal welfare lobby seems to have struck a golden formula for making its point: promise an exclusive to a major current affairs program of shocking "actuality" to galvanise the polities into action.

When animal welfare groups arrived in Canberra last week to lobby to stop the trade on the back of the *Four Corners* program,



Australian cows being loaded onto a truck after arriving at the Tanjung Priok port in Jakarta last month.

Photo: REUTERS

Liberal senator Bill Heffernan unsuccessfully sought an answer from them about why they had not contacted Coalition MPs about their concerns earlier. After all, he said, they were now saying they had known about the brutal practices since November last year, and had filmed them in March.

Heffernan is a pragmatist and understands that for the lobbyists and for *Four Corners*, neither probably wanted to spoil a scoop.

But he makes a rather practical point: the timing of the program — when the northern Australian dry season had begun — meant that the capacity of the industry and the government to act was immediately limited.

This is an industry in which activity is limited to the dry season when cattle are rounded up and transported to ports for shipment, effectively a two-month process.

This had been well and truly committed to by the time the program went to air. If there had

been an earlier alert to what was going on, he argues, questions could have been asked, action could have begun in the wet season and, as a result, the damage to the industry and the distress to thousands of head of cattle now sitting in pens in the hot sun could have been avoided.

Now this is not to say that what we've seen happening is anything other than horrendous, and thank goodness someone is on the case to watch out for it.

But the way political issues like this can run out of anyone's control with unintended consequences is always a wonder to behold.

There are a couple of key differences between what happened after the footage was shown in 2006 and in 2011.

The first relates to changing politics and expectations. If you went into any MP's office in Parliament House last week, they and their staff were groaning under the weight of having to respond to a

storm of emails from outraged constituents. Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig's email system actually collapsed at one point.

Copping such outrage is the job of MPs, but most note that as many as 95 per cent of the emails were standard ones and seemed to emanate from GetUp. For new MPs, it was their first real exposure to an issue catching alight. For others, it was a sign of how public campaigning is changing.

Expectations of what we can control have also changed.

Richard Carleton showed then agriculture minister Peter McGauran looking at the Egyptian footage in his report.

Asked if he was responsible, McGauran simply said "no". When Carleton retorted "yes", McGauran asked "how so?"

This time around, the clear public expectation is that the Australian government can control the Indonesian slaughter trade.

The second difference to 2006

relates to money. The nascent live cattle trade to Egypt was worth \$4 million a year in 2006.

The same trade to Indonesia is now worth about \$330 million a year. That has made the potential economic and political fallout a nightmare.

Live animal exports have always been politically contentious.

So it is a bit of a mystery why the government once again seemed to be caught out on this. There is dispute between it and animal groups about when the minister's office was told about the footage.

But there were warning signs and the risk now is that the entire live export trade may be at risk.

While Ludwig has been caned for not instituting a ban immediately after *Four Corners* went to air, but also now for imposing the ban, the reality is that if Australia really wants to know what is happening to its cattle in Indonesia it will need a system to track them from farm gate to place of slaughter. That probably means electronic tags, a change that in other debates has been resisted by the cattlemen of the north.

Banning shipments to a few rogue abattoirs isn't going to work in a corrupt country where we have no idea where cattle go after being let out of export feedlots at ports.

The industry is right to be angry that Meat and Livestock Australia allowed this situation to happen.

The question of compensation, or at least industry support, is a very complicated one, stretching from those exporters who had committed to move cattle in the past week through to those who will not meet long-standing contractual obligations to deliver cattle.

There was no compensation given as a result of the Egyptian ban imposed by the then Coalition government.

Whether the embattled Gillard government can withstand the pressure for some form of assistance in 2011 is less clear.

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